

CORRESPONDENCE

POPULATION AND SCIENCE

SIR JULIAN HUXLEY has kindly allowed us to reprint a letter which appeared in the *New Statesman* on March 21st, 1959. Readers may think that by its publication in the REVIEW we are preaching to the converted, but Sir Julian so succinctly sets forth the case for population control that we believe that many members of the *Society* will find it helpful to have his argument readily available.

EDITOR

Sir,—Having just returned from the Sixth International Conference on Planned Parenthood in Delhi, where I was able to learn a good deal about over-population, both as a world problem and as it appears to India and other Asian countries, I was frankly bewildered by Professor Bernal's letter.

First of all, he seems not to grasp that the present situation is quite exceptional: we are living through a population crisis during which world numbers are increasing in an unprecedented way—by 47 million last year and at least 50 million this year. The annual rate of increase is also increasing to unprecedented heights. Though it only reached 1 per cent in the present century it is now over 1·5 per cent, and still rising. This explosive increase is due primarily to medical and biological science having spectacularly reduced death rates, without any corresponding fall in birth rates.

Professor Bernal speaks of the wonders that science can bring. This new human phenomenon of world-wide death control is such a wonder. But science must help in balancing death control with birth control if “the richness and promise of man himself” (again to quote Professor Bernal) are to be realized.

Professor Bernal is a physicist, so perhaps it is natural that he should neglect the ecological-evolutionary point of view. However, this is indispensable in dealing with living organisms, including man. Organisms evolve: to do so, they must be adapted to their environment—they must achieve some sort of equilibrium

with it. But evolution is a directional process, and so the adaptation must be to the direction of the process as well as to its present state. In the case of man, we must get away from the hopeless idea of a never-ending race between numbers and food, in favour of the fruitful idea of moving equilibrium between population and resources.

Professor Bernal solemnly states that a fraction of what the capitalist countries now spend on armaments (he does not mention the Communist countries' expenditure), if properly used, could end world malnutrition “in two or three years or sooner”. I can only suppose that he has not troubled to think quantitatively on the subject. According to W.H.O., about 1·8 billion people are now insufficiently nourished, and even two years would add over 100 million new mouths to be fed. He also says that “birth control by itself can never bring about such a result”. No one ever supposed that it could: but it is still necessary.

In general, we must consider the relation between quantity of population and quality of life, and must take account of all kinds of resources, not only food resources but resources of space, enjoyment, education and fulfilment. Excessive numbers and population density impinge on the quality of human life, and curtail the realization of many of its desirable possibilities such as health, human dignity, active employment and sense of individual significance. They are producing water shortages, traffic congestion and cities far beyond optimum size for efficiency and beyond optimum scale for truly human living. Above all, they promote over-organization and regimentation and reduce the area of human freedom.

Professor Bernal rightly says that birth control has its place in protecting the health of mothers and children and preventing women from bearing more children than they want. But he omits to mention the place of birth control in national policy, and even implies that birth control is being forced on underdeveloped

countries "so that people in wealthy countries would no longer be offended by the knowledge of starving millions and could then feel exempt from doing anything to help them or even from letting them help themselves"!

This is not so. Countries like India and Japan have made population control a central feature in national policy, because they know that without it they are headed for disaster. In under-developed countries, excessive population increase reduces the possibility of an economic break-through. The money and energy spent on feeding, clothing, housing, educating and servicing the annual crop of new human beings must be deducted from the money and energy that could and should be devoted to investment in industrial and social improvement. When the economic level is low and population increase is high, this may lead to what Coale and Hoover, in their careful study of the situation in India (*Population Growth and Economic Development in Low-Income Countries: and Case-study of India's Prospects*), call a point of economic no return. They conclude that this will happen in India unless the birth rate is halved within 25 or 30 years. The Indian authorities have taken this

to heart, and are intensifying their preparations for an all-out campaign to check population increase. They have established admirable centres for demographic research and training and for contraceptive testing, and are setting up camps to train young surgeons to undertake sterilization operations.

Professor Bernal says that "the population curve . . . is fairly certain to pass the five billion mark by the end of the century". This is perfectly correct, but it is also certain that if we do nothing to bring down the rate of increase, our grandchildren will live in a world of increasing misery and frustration.

To anyone capable of taking a non-political and evolutionary view, unchecked population increase appears as the most serious threat to man's future. Our duty is clear: to strive for a proper balance between population and resources; to increase the production and improve the distribution of food; and especially to give maximum support, through the United Nations and all other organizations, to scientific research on human reproduction, and to projects for its better control.

JULIAN HUXLEY

MORBIDITY AND MORTALITY IN THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE

A Field Enquiry in Fifteen Areas of England and Wales

Edited by FRED GRUNDY, M.D., M.R.C.P., D.P.H.
and E. LEWIS-FANING, D.Sc., Ph.D.(Med.), F.S.S.

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145 pages with diagrams and tabular matter.

PUBLISHED BY THE EUGENICS SOCIETY 1957

Price 18s.